PATRIARCHAL HEGEMONY IN SHOBHAA DE'S *SISTERS* (1992)

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Shobhaa De is a prominent figure among modern Indian women writers in English, whose fiction deals with the changing socioeconomic realities of metropolitan India. Her works usually deal with marriage, family relationships, sexuality, gender discrimination, economic independence, women's identity, and the struggle between traditional social standards and the aspirations of modern women. Her female protagonists are frequently set in a culture that allows men a great deal of freedom while requiring women to follow established rules of conduct. As a result, De's fiction provides useful material for studying the operation of patriarchy in contemporary Indian society.

Sisters (1992) is especially noteworthy in this perspective. The tale follows Mallika Hiralal, also known as Mikki, and Alisha, two daughters of Seth Hiralal with opposing social and familial statuses. Mikki is Hiralal's legal daughter, but Alisha is the result of his relationship with Leelaben, his guard's wife. Their relationship begins in a context of competitiveness, anger, and unequal social status. However, their interactions with men gradually draw them closer together, and they eventually recognize the importance of mutual support and self-reliance (De 1–25).

The novel's portrayal of patriarchy is not restricted to the actions of particular men. It operates through marriage, family, sexuality, property, economic power, and cultural expectations. Mikki and Alisha's experiences highlight how women can be denied autonomy despite having education, income, social position, or professional opportunities. The novel therefore examines the systems that establish and maintain women's subordination rather than merely opposing individual male and female characters.

Patriarchal Authority and Seth Hiralal :

Seth Hiralal, the owner of Hiralal Industries, is one of the novel's most powerful symbols of patriarchal control. He is a wealthy and socially influential individual whose personal behaviour differs significantly from the respectable image associated with his position. He is married to Maltiben and has a daughter, Mikki, but this does not prevent him from having relationships with other women.

Hiralal's actions demonstrate a double standard for male and female sexuality. His adulterous encounters are treated as indications of male privilege rather than behaviour carrying the same social implications for women. His relationship with Leelaben results in the birth of Alisha, but the social penalties are borne primarily by the woman and child, not Hiralal.

Alisha's position is particularly instructive. Despite the fact that Hiralal is her biological father, she is denied the social recognition that comes with having a legitimate family. She is not permitted to enter his home after his death. This episode demonstrates the distinction

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between biological paternity and patriarchal ideas of legitimacy. Hiralal can father a child outside marriage without losing his social status, while Alisha is defined by her birth

circumstances.

De therefore highlights a fundamental paradox in patriarchal society: the woman and child connected to the circumstance may be stigmatized, while the man who causes it has the social power to hide or manage it. Alisha is affected by a social structure that fails to hold the powerful male figure equally responsible while distinguishing between relationships that are considered acceptable and those that are not.

The Development of Female Obedience in Marriage :

One of the main mechanisms by which patriarchal authority functions in *Sisters* is marriage. De challenges the notion that marriage inevitably offers women emotional fulfilment and stability. Instead, marriage can become a means of limiting a woman's individuality.

At first glance, Mikki and Binny Malhotra seem to have a romantic relationship. Binny makes an effort to win her over with affectionate gestures and material displays. But after they marry, his behaviour changes. He begins to place limitations on Mikki and demands that she take on the role customarily assigned to women in a patriarchal home.

Mikki wishes to remain involved in business, but Binny rejects the idea. He insists that women in his family belong within the domestic sphere:

No. That's not how it works in my family. Our women stay at home and make sure that the place is perfectly run. They fulfil their husbands' every need and look good when their men get home every evening. No office-going. No business meeting. And you'd better get used to it. (De 136)

Economic Dependency and Women's Professional Identity :

In *Sisters*, economic control is one of the significant aspects of patriarchy. At first, Mikki is connected to a strong commercial enterprise. She is somewhat independent because of her financial position, but marriage jeopardizes that independence.

In an effort to keep Mikki away from her company, Binny takes over her assets. The procedure is significant because it shows how women's lack of control over financial resources can strengthen patriarchal power. Even though a woman may theoretically be wealthy, her financial independence remains vulnerable if she is unable to control or manage those resources.

The transformation of Mikki's office symbolizes this loss of control. Her professional space is altered without her meaningful participation, and she finds herself increasingly excluded from areas of the business that should belong to her. The business, which once represented her identity and agency, becomes another arena in which male authority is exercised.

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When Mikki questions Binny about the changes, he responds: "Wives should not concern themselves with matters of this sort. It seems you learned nothing in your parents' home. Not even cooking" (De 165).

The contrast between "business" and "cooking" is significant. Binny dismisses Mikki's professional concerns and replaces them with the domestic skills he expects from a wife. Her knowledge of business has no value within his patriarchal conception of marriage. What matters is her ability to perform domestic functions.

De thus reveals the cultural reasoning that minimizes women's professional identities. Even though a woman is intelligent and accomplished, marriage is expected to focus her skills on the home. Ambition in the workplace is treated as incompatible with femininity.

An Alternative to Patriarchal Dependency : Sisterhood :

At the book's conclusion, the title *Sisters* takes on new meaning. Because of their different positions within Hiralal's household, Mikki and Alisha first seem to be rivals. Over time, however, their common experiences show that both are affected by patriarchal systems.

Rivalry gives way to unity in their relationship. The two women recognize that their encounters with men have frequently resulted in betrayal, disillusionment, and insecurity. Their choice to collaborate therefore signifies more than a sensible commercial arrangement. It represents the possibility of female solidarity as an alternative to dependence on patriarchal authority.

Gupta and Chugh analyse *Sisters* in terms of the struggle between patriarchal structures and women's empowerment. Their discussion places the daughters' experiences within a movement toward greater self-sufficiency, while the father and father-figure characters represent sources of dominance (45–48).

De's feminist depiction revolves around this movement. The narrative does not merely substitute female dominance for male dominance. Rather, it challenges the notion that women's social and economic survival depends on male authority.

The two sisters' transformation gives the novel its broader significance. Mikki moves from subservience to her husband toward financial and personal independence, while Alisha moves from social exclusion toward greater self-reliance. Their eventual collaboration demonstrates the significance of female solidarity. Prabhakaran similarly reads Mikki and Alisha's movement from subalternity toward self-determination and self-reliance (112–15).

Patriarchy is therefore portrayed in the novel as a system rather than merely a set of individual behaviours. It functions through beliefs about what a wife ought to be, how a woman ought to act, who should control property and business, whose sexuality should be controlled, and whose decisions should take precedence within marriage.

The choice Mikki and Alisha make to begin again together represents a movement away from dependence and toward greater independence. Their experience emphasizes financial autonomy, personal identity, and mutual support. *Sisters* can thus be read as a critique of

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patriarchal structures and as a narrative of women's movement from subordination toward autonomy.

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